

## Prayer, Part 1

### St Alphonsus Liguori, Doctor of the Church

“Prayer is a *necessary* and certain means of obtaining salvation, and all the graces that we require for that end.”

“Those who pray will be saved and those who do not will be damned.”

“This is, and will be, the greatest torment in hell: to think how easily they might have been saved, just by asking God for His grace, but now it is too late - their time of prayer is gone.”

St Alphonsus Liguori is just one saint, along with all the saints, the whole Church, and our Lord Himself, who brings out the necessity of prayer in order to fulfill the purpose of this life. But what is prayer? How does a person really pray? The first question is perhaps: why pray?

#### 1. Who Cares? Why care?

In what's called the first part of the second part of his great “Summary of Theology” (the Summa) St Thomas Aquinas takes up the general topic of “man.” What is the basic nature of man, what does he need, and so on. He begins this topic with that which is the most basic, fundamental drive of man, that which motivates everything a person thinks, says, and does, as well as everything that he does not do. It is the most basic root of all motivation. It is an inescapable desire, a motivating force that you cannot root out, you cannot overcome it, you can't shake it. It is irrevocably embedded in every single human being that has ever existed or ever will exist, starting with Adam & Eve. Echoing St Augustine, Aquinas points that this deep, fundamental desire is very simply...happiness. Everything a person does, whether good or evil, is because somewhere in the back of their mind they believe it will bring them happiness. This desire for happiness drives everything. Even for someone who has the habit of being grumpy and sour somehow believes that this will bring them happiness, or at least avoid unhappiness. This drive for happiness remains deeply embedded in the human soul for all eternity. Hell is the never-ending frustration (lack of fulfillment and impossibility of fulfillment) of this desire. Even in the tragic case where someone contemplates taking their own life, they are trying to escape a terrible unhappiness. This drive for happiness, then, can even overcome the very strong drive for life; it is that powerful. If you think carefully about your own interior workings, it is easy to see that this is true.

Now what does this have to do with prayer? Fr Vincent Miceli, in his book “The Gods of Atheism,” points out that the first commandment does *not* say: thou shalt not be an atheist. It *does* say: You shall not have false gods before Me. Why? The drive for happiness is so powerful that whatever we believe will bring us happiness, that is and will be “god” for us, whether or not it is actually the one true God. And whatever we believe is “god” – the source of happiness – is what we will pay homage to, it will be first and foremost, all else will be sacrificed for it. For some, it might be career; for others maybe human respect, standing in the community, recognition, honors and all the like; or maybe my own self, my judgements, my self-righteousness; wealth, comfort, security, laziness, pleasure – there's no end to false gods that man might embrace: broad is the path to perdition, our Lord said, and many there are that choose it. That is equivalent to saying: broad is the choice of “gods” that man selects from. Even true goods like marriage and family life can be corrupted, disrupted, or broken entirely by treating them as gods; if I do that, I place a weight on them that they cannot bear because they cannot satisfy that ultimate thirst. With the first commandment our Lord is revealing to us something about ourselves, namely that that unshakable desire for happiness, that He Himself as Creator placed in us, cannot be satisfied by anything other than the one true God, by infinite, boundless love.

So why pray? Who cares? Because relation with God is the *only* thing that can quench that insurmountable desire for happiness, and prayer (whatever exactly that is, we haven't come to that yet) is an indispensable part of building that relation. *Perfect* happiness cannot be attained in this life but the happiness brought about by a *genuine* relation with the one true God must begin in this life or it never begins at all. For those who begin to build this relation in this life, the happiness of that relation (which no one and no situation can take from you) endures in even the most difficult, sorrowful, and tragic moments of this life. What does “Heaven” mean? It means the complete, uninterrupted fulfillment of this desire for happiness. When St Alphonsus said that prayer

is a necessary means for salvation, then, what he meant (or another way to say that) is that it is a necessary means to fulfill this insuppressible desire for happiness.

## 2. What is the essence of prayer?

To answer the question of how to pray and thus begin to satisfy that unshakable desire for happiness, we have to say what prayer really is. It sets the course. The first thing is: what prayer is *not*. As Catholics we are fortunate that God has provided a very broad range of “formulary” or devotional prayers like the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and so on. And, of course, we also have the great liturgical prayers of the Church, like the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours). While it would be misleading to say that there is a downside to these, it would be correct to say that these can also be “corrupted” in that we get used to just rattling them off rather thoughtlessly, without ever really thinking about God, and then telling myself that I’ve prayed. So the first thing to say is that prayer is not a matter of just rattling off words. Our Lord provided this instruction when He said: When you pray, do not babble like the pagans. Too often people give up on prayer, believing it does not and will not bring them happiness. That could be in part because they’ve never really been taught what real prayer is and so when they try it, the only thing they know to do is “babble like the pagans.” They are right in saying that will not and does not bring them happiness but it’s because that’s not real prayer. Priests are required to pray the Divine Office every day; a large part of it are the Psalms. And my mind can begin to drift as I “pray” the Psalms. When it does, I have left true prayer. And I can tell the difference. When I really concentrate on what the Psalms are saying, allow myself to be absorbed in them, it is like the Lord speaking to me and me speaking to the Lord. When my mind drifts, that is not present.

So what is the essence of prayer? St Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian, wrote deep treatises on the Trinity, on Christ, on the sacraments, and so on – things a person could spend a lifetime studying and trying to understand. And what did he say prayer is? Very simply: **prayer is raising your mind to God**. So when our Lord said: when you pray, do not babble like the pagans, St Thomas is pointing out that what He meant is that we have to truly raise our mind to God; otherwise we end up babbling like the pagans.

## 3. Silence and The Inner Room

But what does it mean to: raise your mind to God? How does a person do that? A person cannot pray without silence. But silence here does not mean merely the absence of outside noise. While the absence of outside noise is very helpful for praying, the silence of prayer means that I have put everything else out of my mind except the Lord, the mysteries of the faith, the angels and saints, what God has revealed. This is very much tied to our Lord’s instruction of: when you pray, go to your inner room. By an “inner room” our Lord does not mean a physical place, He means the depths of our own interior, our own heart. It is a “place” in my own interior that is me and God alone. The communication “in the inner room” is like the deeply personal and intimate communication between a husband & wife, which is not shared with others.

Prayer can be, and has been, described in numerous ways. These other ways of describing prayer can help us to further understand what it is. They can help us further understand Aquinas’ most basic definition (raising your mind to God) as well as silence and the inner room. Prayer has also been called “conversation with God.” In a real conversation, each person is really listening to the other and getting to know the other, even (or especially) their deepest interior; in other words, you’ve put aside everything else and are giving your full, undivided attention to the other person. Prayer is the same except in this case the other person is God, even if the prayer is directed to Him through an intermediary or intercessor like our Holy Mother, or one of the other saints, or one of the angels. Now the converse is also true. If you go see someone and they’re trying to talk to you and you respond with an occasional, uh-huh, yep, oh yes, but the whole time you’re looking at your phone, or out the window, or thinking about a 1000 other things, everything except what the person is saying to you, you are not really having a conversation with that person. They’re trying to talk to you, but you don’t actually enter into conversation with them. The same is true for prayer; prayer entails: raising your mind to God, entering into silence (putting everything else out of your mind), going to your inner room (it’s just you and God). Conversation with God (prayer) is not unlike conversation with anyone else.

To be continued (God willing) next week. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.